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SUBJECT: PANAMA: DEALING WITH THE DARIEN

REF: A. A: PANAMA 00650
[1](#)B. B: PANAMA 00725

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S//NF) The Darien, Panama's forgotten frontier, is under pressure from drug traffickers and remnants of the FARC. The FARC do not present a serious military threat to Panama or Colombia, but they do threaten to degenerate into banditry, as the organization implodes. While the U.S. is helping to strengthen Panama's security forces on the border, it will be some time before they are strong enough to militarily confront the FARC. There is an extensive law enforcement investigation underway against the FARC logistical infrastructure in Panama, that may deal a stronger blow than any military blow could. Meanwhile the FARC and the drug dealers pose a threat to the indigenous communities, as drugs and guns flood in, alienating the local population. Post believes the best way to limit the ability of all illegal groups to operate in the Darien is reinforce the negative reaction local groups have to the illegal groups by assisting the GOP to effectively govern the Darien, following on the successful experience of the Government of Colombia in the Social Recovery of Territory. End Summary.

Panama's Step-Daughter Under Pressure

[1](#)2. (C) The Darien region of Panama is a forgotten corner of the country that few Panamanians know, travel to, or care about. Dominated by thick forest and criss-crossed by major rivers, it is the ultimate frontier for Panamanians. The most famous thing about the Darien is what there is not - a continuation of the Pan-American Highway (the Darien Gap). Its very underdevelopment has long been seen by Panamanians as an effective barrier against Colombia's political and drug violence. As a result, it has never received significant public or private investment. There are schools or health

clinics in the Darien, and even fewer roads. Most transportation is by foot or by boat, making it very difficult to move people or goods (licit or illicit). The population of the Darien is less than 50,000, grouped in three main types of population centers: the mestizo agricultural communities, concentrated along the one main road; the mestizo and Afro-Panamanian fishing communities, grouped in water-side communities; and traditional Embera-Wounaan Indian communities, grouped in two separate semi-autonomous "comarcas", one to the north of the Pan-American Highway (Cemaco), and one to the south (Sambu). Abandoned by the central government for the last 100 years, the people of the Darien have largely ignored the central government in response, being more or less content to scratch out a meager living from the land and the water. This status quo has been challenged lately by two factors: an increased interest on the part of the GOP in exploiting the economic potential of the Darien, and the increased presence in the Darien of drug traffickers and members of illegal armed groups, especially the FARC.

No Eight Foot Giant

13. (S//NF) Post believes that there are at any given time between 200-600 members of the FARC in the Darien. Reports from indigenous leaders indicate that they are concentrated in two river valleys near the border, and far away from any population centers. These camps are R&R points, where FARC fighters retreat to when things in Colombia get too "hot." Unofficial reports from U.S. military personnel who have close contact with Panamanian Frontier Forces in the Darien indicate that the FARC fighters are arriving over the border in deplorable condition, without adequate equipment, and ill-nourished. Recent FARC activities in the Darien have included the repeated holding up of a small bodega in the tiny town of Bajo Chiquito, apparently because the FARC do not have money to pay for supplies, as they traditionally have done (see reftel a). It is Post's view that the FARC fighters in the Darien are an increasingly rag-tag group, without effective leadership, communications, or logistical support. The Darien is less a secure base for them as it is a log a drowning man grabs onto for dear life. As such, the FARC camps in Panama do not represent a strategic threat to Colombia. Rather, these groups represent a growing threat to Panama, as the FARC disintegrates into criminal bands. This is the threat the GOP had in mind when they reformed the police to create a separate Frontier Police Service (SENAFRONT) (see reftel b).

US Help In the Darien

14. (S//NF) It is also Post's view that SENAFRONT does not yet have the capacity to confront the experienced FARC fighters without significant risk of defeat. SENAFRONT theoretically has 2,000 men under its control, but many of them have been pulled away from the frontier in recent months to augment the undermanned Panamanian National Police (PNP) in Panama City and other population centers, in an attempt to control a crime wave that has caused social alarm. This constant cannibalizing of the Frontier Forces was a major justification for creating a separate force -- SENAFRONT -- which could concentrate on the Darien. But SENAFRONT still needs to be organized, trained, properly equipped, and to incorporate more manpower before it can be expected to provide any greater capacity than at present. While Post's ODC and NAS are working on training and equipping this force, it will take time before their efforts bear serious results. ODC has a 12 soldier strong Joint Planning and Assistance Team (JPAT), which trains SENAFRONT on basic logistics, maintenance, combat life saver, and light infantry tactics in training areas near Panama City, and then takes "technical assistance visits" to Meteti, in the near part of the Darien, to observe their trainees in action. A 10-man SEAL team works with a smaller group from SENAFRONT on advanced Counter-Narco

Terrorism training. ODC is also working on equipping SENAFRONT with some trucks, boats, communications equipment and night vision kits, as well as building barracks. NAS, accompanied by ODC, recently took the commander of the SENAFRONT, Commissioner Frank Abrego, to Colombia to meet the leadership of the Colombian National Police, who promised up to 60 training slots for SENAFRONT in their Jungle Training School. The trip helped forge connections between the Colombians and the Panamanians which Post hopes will lead to fruitful cooperation in the future.

Red Lines

15. (S//NF) Even when all this training and equipping is finished, the GOP will be reluctant to confront the FARC directly. While the GOP realize they must begin to exert greater sovereignty over their border in order to control the FARC as it disintegrates, the Minister of Government and Justice has told us that he plans to use SENAFRONT to reduce the FARC's operating room in Panama little by little until it is essentially pushed out of Panama and back into Colombia, without having to confront it directly. In this process, the GOP has clearly rejected USG offers to directly assist it in the Darien. Current GOP policy refuses to allow U.S. military personnel to train Panamanian forces in the Darien, though the "technical assistance visits" mentioned above are allowed. The GOP is reviewing our diplomatic notes on upcoming training very closely to make sure we are not trying to bend the rules. The GOP also rejected a recent DEA offer to fly a FAST team in to the Darien to provide helicopter coverage for anti-drug operations. It seems the GOP is worried that U.S. forces might be wounded or kidnapped by the FARC, or might militarily engage with the FARC on their own authority. Should any of these scenarios play out, the GOP would lose by being forced into a major confrontation for which it is not prepared, and in the process drawing attention to the presence of the FARC, which would be bad for business in bustling, thriving Panama City.

Judicializing the Fight

16. (S//NF) There is a second more serious FARC presence in Panama. The 57th Front, based on the Colombian side of the border, is a logistical Front that runs a drug and arms trafficking operation that helps to supply FARC forces in western Colombia. This Front has a strong presence in Panama City, smuggling routes throughout Panama, and a permanent presence in the Darien. DEA and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York are running a complex investigation of this group, based on a very sensitive judicialized wire-tap program (called "Matador"), funded by NAS. Post hopes this investigation will lead to a decisive judicial blow against the 57th Front later in the year, though serious obstacles to taking down or arresting the ring leaders are still to be overcome. This would greatly weaken the FARC in Panama and Colombia. Matador represents an extraordinary level of cooperation from the GOP, who are essentially allowing the USG to run phone taps on Panamanian phones. The GOP has done an excellent job of using the information picked up by Matador to capture drug shipments without revealing where the information is coming from, thus allowing us to deal powerful blows to drug traffickers, while maintaining our overall investigation of the FARC. Information from Matador has allowed the USG to obtain tremendous amounts of information on the 57th Front, other drug trafficking organizations, and other high profile and sensitive criminal investigations. Post considers defending the Matador program, and the GOP goodwill which makes it possible to be of paramount importance, even at the cost of not pushing other issues such as direct U.S. action in the Darien.

Socio-Cultural Threat

¶7. (C) The FARC is a major drug trafficker in the Darien, but not the most important. Many other Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) operate in the Darien. They tend to bring drugs into the Darien by go-fast, and then transfer them to land, either coming up the Pan-American Highway, or taking them overland by paths cut through the jungle. The traffickers are using the indigenous Embera-Wounaan, either willingly or by force, to facilitate this trade. Some organizations kidnap members of the Embera-Wounaan to guide them, while others hire young people to work for them. This is doing tremendous damage to the social fabric of the indigenous comarcas, as the Grand Cacique (Chief) of the Embera tribe, Betanio Chiquidama, told the Ambassador October 24. Chiquidama explained that Embera youth are being recruited by drug traffickers to guide them and work for them, and are being paid in weapons and drugs. They are also being encouraged to form youth gangs to work for the traffickers, which in turn challenges the traditional social structure of the Embera-Wounaan. Chiquidama asked the Ambassador for help bringing the trafficking under control. Post believes the position taken by the Embera leadership gives us a major opportunity to increase cooperation and coordination in the region on security and other issues, as detailed below.

Drain the Water, Before They Learn to Swim

¶8. (C) The key limiting factor on FARC activity in the Darien is the lack of a sympathetic local population. Panamanians in general do not like Colombians, and there is no local sympathy for the FARC in the Darien. While some villages may engage in low-level commerce with FARC elements, it is on a strictly pay-as-you-go basis. The recent FARC incursion into Bajo Chiquito to steal goods from a local store (see reftel a) led the locals to call in SENAFRONT. This lack of local support for the FARC or other Colombian groups gives Panama a major advantage as it struggles to respond to the threat the potential disintegration of the FARC represents. But given the lack of effective governance on the ground in the Darien, the central government has few options to respond should the situation take a turn for the worse.

Colombian Model

¶9. (C) Post believes that the Colombian experience with the "Social Recovery of Territory (SRT)," as coordinated by the Center for the Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI) within the Office of the President of Colombia, offers an excellent example of what the way forward should look like. The extension of effective Panamanian sovereignty over the Darien requires a holistic approach, and not just a military approach. The real threat in the Darien is the potential disaffection of the local population, which might turn the latent military threat of the rag-tag FARC elements into a genuine problem. Bringing effective government to the people of the Darien is the best way to prevent that. In analyzing the Colombian experience with SRT, Post believes that there are valuable lessons for Panama. The Government of Colombia (GOC) has stressed the need to provide local security and rule of law, by bringing local police, judges and prosecutors to remote regions. Cacique Chiquidama specifically complained to the Ambassador that SENAFRONT does not enter the semi-autonomous indigenous Comarcas where most of the Embera-Wounaan live, instead remaining in their base in Meteti or patrolling the highway. They are thus not seen as providing protection to the local population, or helping them protect their children from the threat of co-optation by armed groups. Post has proposed organizing a meeting between Commissioner Abrego of SENAFRONT and the Embera leadership to encourage joint patrols with local Embera volunteer community police. Even relatively small moves to re-deploy SENAFRONT

forces to villages and towns could have a major effect on local opinion, and provide the police with excellent sources of intelligence. Commissioner Abrego and NAS Panama heard over and over from Colombian police officials on their recent visit to Colombia that community policing was the key to Colombia's success. Post wants to use Merida funds to encourage the Panamanian police to adopt community policing in the Darien as well as in inner-city neighborhoods.

¶10. (C) Cacique Chiqidama also asked the Ambassador to help convey the message to the GOP that the Embera want increased coordination between the central government and their local government, so that resources are aimed at the real problems of the people. 27 of 28 Embera villages in Cemaco have do not have easy access to fresh water. Relatively easy steps which could eliminate bottle-necks to economic growth, like improving access to markets for local bananas, have not been taken. Again, this is a key element of the Colombian SRT strategy, with all government agencies being coordinated by the CCAI to help improve governance and service delivery in marginal communities. Post will try to leverage our Merida-funded Darien programs to convince the GOP to establish a coordinating mechanism in the Darien which can ensure that the voice of the people of the Darien is heard in policy making.

Put Our Money Where Our Mouth Is?

¶11. (C) Realistically speaking, our call for coordinated action in the Darien will be more readily heard if the USG brings resources to bear on the issue. USAID has a proposal for funding under 1207, if funds are available, for a local government strengthening program in the Darien which would be an excellent way to focus the GOP on the issue, and give the USG a say in how the problems are addressed. Post will try to use a forest management program that USAID has in the Darien to promote this issue, but it is not clear how far that will get us. USAID also plans to use some of the Merida Community Action funds to work on gang prevention in the Darien, with an eye towards promoting this overall strategy. Post will also continue to work creatively with ODC to make maximum use of its Humanitarian Assistance Program and Medical Readiness Training exercises to promote greater government coordination, and local development in the Darien. ODC conducted the first Medical Readiness Training exercises in the Darien in many years in May 2008, signaling a loosening of the previous GOP policy to refuse all requests for U.S. military deployments in the Darien.

Step-Daughter No More?

¶12. (C) This strategy will not work if there is not buy-in from the GOP. This may now be possible because the GOP is beginning to focus on the economic potential of the Darien. During the Panamax exercise in August, PolOff was given a briefing by a GOP official on the potential economic development of the Darien, especially as an exporter of organic beef and valuable timber. The briefer stressed the relationship between the economic development plans in the Darien and the security reforms. The clear impression was that Panama needed to gain control of its territory to fully exploit it. Post will stress to GOP counterparts that effective governance, provision of basic services, and community support are also keys for the success of any attempt to promote economic development in the Darien. The more legitimate activity there is in the Darien the less room there will be for illegal activities, and the more support there will be for a strong, integrated police presence. This is the best path forward to bring the Darien into Panama's social structure, and to push out the FARC and other armed groups.
STEPHENSON